DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 294 196 CS 211 180

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TITLE Literature and Everyday Decisions: An Essay about the Influence of Literature on Decision-Making.
PUB DATE Oct 87
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Creating Word Conference (Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, October 29-31, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Affective Behavior; Daily Living Skills; Decision Making; *Literature Appreciation; Reader Response; *Reader Text Relationship; *Values Education
IDENTIFIERS Aesthetic Reading; Reading Uses

ABSTRACT

Literature is an artistic expression which teaches human beings valuable lessons about life. Literature invites the reader to share decisions with the decisions of others--the characters seen in literature. Unlike science or philosophy or ethics, which make people say "I understand" and then "I see," literature, as an art, begins with the statement "I see" or "I feel" and then moves to "I understand." Classics like Albert Camus' "The Fall," Miguel de Cervantes' "Don Quixote," the children's book "Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes," Joseph Conrad's "Youth," Fyodor Dostoevsky's "Notes from Underground," Nikos Kazantzakis' "Zorba the Greek," and Somerset Maugham's "Rain" help an individual make better decisions by providing direct analogies to real life events, forcing self-criticism, assisting in the questioning of reality and the redefining of ideas, and helping people to see with their feelings and to see through the eyes of others. Teachers of English can choose to teach literature from the inside rather than the outside. Comprehension, structure and vocabulary can be supplanted by a partaking of the character's life, watching the implications of the character's actions, and finally understanding individual lives through the lives of others. (MHC)

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# Literature and Everyday Decisions:

## An Essay About the Influence of Literature on Decision-Making

Presented at The Creating Word Conference

October 30, 1987

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### Introduction

I am pleased to be part of this conference on learning and teaching English, and I mean to add my personal celebration to the spirit of the conference. My celebration is a celebration of literature as an artistic expression, as a great social creation, and in itself as a way of human knowing. But literture is more than these things separately. As art, it is an epistemology that teaches humans valuable lessons. Literature is about knowing, and about knowing in a particularly unique way. Art is emotion; and, emotion is a necessary part of human life. We need, as humans, a literature because we live with feeling, passion, and emotion. We need to share our feelings, passions, and emotions so that others might learn from them. We need literature, and we use it to fulfill our needs.

I was tempted to call my presentation today "Blue Collar Conceptions of Literature." Lots of people don't like what I say about literature. I talk to many people who understand literature as something to do with a fireplace on the left and a cognac on the right. Literature represents leisure,

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winding down, mental enjoyment. This is a beautiful picture and I support it; but, it is not the one I want to talk about today.

I want to talk about how literature works. I want to talk about the necessary, didactic work of literature and the artists who created it. I want to tell you about the kind of literature that represents the human story, what these stories mean to me personally, what they mean to us as humans, and what they mean to me as I work to build curriculum as a writer and as a teacher. For me, the curriculum work that I have done with literature (especially the Scholastic junior high school Eye-glass series, which I am not actively hawking today) represents the best work I have done to this point in my writing career. This is the work most representative of my beliefs about literature, social studies, and education is all about. If you ever see this work, I hope that you like it. But, if you don't like it, don't ever buy anything else I have done before 1987. Save your money.

## I Have Made Some Decisions This Month

This has been a normal month for me, maybe a bit busier than usual, but normal, nonetheless. I am the father of three children and the husband of one woman. I am teaching three university courses. My work as a professor takes me into schools where I meet both teachers and students. I am on the board of directors of a charitable organization, the chairperson of a graduate committee, and the advisor of a large number (my Chairman tells me) of graduate students. I make numerous decisions regarding my own life and affecting the lives of others everyday. I want these decisions to be good ones, honest ones, considerate ones. My reading and thinking about

literature has helped me make these decisions. I want to recall some of these decisions today, right here in front of everybody, and to point out how my consideration of literature has helped me make these decisions in a better, more honest, and more considerate manner. To do this, I want to point out some of the things that literature does for us as we attempt to make decisions.

Literature Provides Direct Analogies

In my job, I visit teachers. I was visiting a first-year teacher not long ago, and as usual I made an initial visit just to let the person know my face (they knew I was coming) and to make a more formal arrangement for a later appointment. I knocked at the door of a young woman teacher. She emerged, wondering who I was, not having seen me before. As she looked at me somewhat curiously, I explained who I was, that I wanted to meet with her at her convenience, and that I would like to make an arrangement today about when that convenient time was.

She looked at me strangely, as though she were going to cry. I know that my job status can scare people I am going to supervise, but usually not this badly. I thought that I was imagining things, and did what I usually do in times of some discomfort. I filled the hallway with the noise of my voice in an effort to conceal my concerns about what was happening. She was going to cry, I decided. She stammered and said that she just didn't know when she would have time. She was, well, very busy. I knew that something more was wrong than she said, so I stopped my prepared speech. I told her that she didn't know me from a whole in the ground and that I didn't know her; but, I

did know that something was very wrong and that I thought that she should talk to me about it. Right now. Her senior English class could take care of themselves for the rest of the period. Where could we go?

She did talk to me. Her story was a common one for first-year teachers. She had overplanned. She had asked her students to do too much work. She had not been able to get it graded. One essay, especially, was a mountain that she couldn't see over. It had remained ungraded for more than four weeks. It was almost the start of the second semester. She had three new units to teach. They weren't planned. She was up against the wall. She was a single mother. Her child, just under a year old, was a problem. She didn't know people. She didn't have a babysitter. It was Friday and she was stuck all weekend long with him, and she wasn't going to be able to get these things done. She didn't know what she would do. She couldn't admit her mistake to her colleagues. She wanted to continue to teach there.

Really, an immediate solution seemed simple enough for me. I told her to go home and not to worry about the papers for the weekend. Don't even think about them. Play with her little boy. I would be back Monday morning. I would help. If we needed, I would bring one of my research assistants with me. We would grade the papers together, and we would plan her three units. On Monday morning, I showed up. I spent only a few hours with her that next week, helped her grade a few papers, and helped her plan her units a little. She took care of her own problems. I did very little.

When I recall my actions, I am surprised at my boldness. Why should I push the issue, especially with a woman I didn't know? I am surprised that I would risk embarrassment. What if she told me to go stuff it? My point is

this. I have made some decisions about how I would live, and I have used literature as powerful analogy for helping me make those decisions.

Albert Camus is a favorite author, introduced to me by the Chairman of the Department of Social and Philosophical Foundations at The University of Kentucky who was a Camus scholar. Camus' short novel The Fall tells of a young man's confession that he allowed a young woman to commit suicide, without offering help. He saw her on the bridge and, as he walked on, he heard the splash and her weakening cries for help. He ignored her. He just left. He had chosen his self-love over the love of another human. This action, Camus tells me, is the beginning of the decline of a man's moral and spiritual nature. He fell much farther than she did. I am instructed. In a situation like the one I faced, walking away would be the start of my fall.

## Literature Provides Examples

How powerfully this nasty little story differs from Thomas Merton's short essay "A Member of the Human Race." Merton states:

> In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I was theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers.

Certainly, I am not stating that I was thinking of the story when I made the decision to speak to the young woman. Certainly, I am not stating that I saved the young woman's life. But, without making my actions sound heroic, I know that I did help her. And, I halted my own fall. I know that I have been touched by the literature that I knew, maybe not consciously at the time of the decision, but, I have thought about it in reference to my lifestyle

and my considered vocation. Literature is, after all, a story of life - the young man in the story and me. Literature has had an impact on the way I have chosen to live.

Literature Forces Self-criticism

I also remember other literature and believe that it, also, has had a lasting impact on the decisions that I make during my life. Notes from Underground is a Dostoevsky story I have shared with others. The story tells of a man who is truely a member of the underground, not an individual of status, underprivileged. He is pushed by his bad humor, and fueled by other's insensitivity I suspect, to hate things like truth, beauty, and even happiness. He speaks strongly against these things. He is a cripple, he says. Stillborn. Suffering is his consciousness.

His life differs from my own. I do have the privilege of status, and I recognize and am thankful for this status. Suffering is not the sole order of my consciousness. In fact, like other teachers I know, I believe that it is my vocation to rid the world of suffering, lack of understanding, lack of power, and lack of vision. But, I don't always work at my job. My work is, in part, one of self-criticism. I must constantly be critical of my thoughts and actions. How do I erode the status of others? When do I act in ways that are more harmful than helpful? Do I live a cliche? If I am one who is truely a teacher, I must seriously pose this question. The literature I know has helped me. It has also helped me understand that, even in the simple posing of the question, I have become a better teacher. I can consciously make decisions based on the principle that I will attempt to act in ways that

will not annul another's personal nature, desire, or vision.

Some of my decisions are simple ones. I wear a Batman watch because the watch helps break down some of the barriers that exist between me and other people. People talk with me on elevators and airplanes. Kids talk to me. Even women seem not to fear a man with a Batman watch. Superman, I found, was too macho. Batman is better. Not all of my decisions are earth shattering; but, they are often informed by the literature that I have read.

Literature Helps Us Question Reality

Two characters from literature help inform my choices about what is real: Don Quixote and Zorba the Greek. I'm not like either one of these men, fortunately or unfortunately; but, they instruct my actions. Don Quixote is a man whose thinking has become unhinged, interestingly enough by reading too much literature. He perceives the world unrealistically. It is filled with an evil that can only be overcome by a knight, a savior. Don Quixote takes his rusty armor from the attic, cleans it off, grabs the mule-riding Sancho Panza, and rides off to conquer. But, he mistakes windmills for giants. He adopts a scullery girl named Dulcinea as his ideal, sees only her mythical beauty and not any of her ugliness, and fights for her honor when, in fact, she seems to have little.

I smile at Don Quixote; but, I admire him. He has that dream that we lost some time ago. His innocence is terrifying, but admirable. There is a real danger, Don Quixote tells us, but can we recognize it? Is he mad, or are we? What is good and what is evil? How can I know it?

I am instructed by Don Quixote. My daughter, when she was in grade one,

was the topic of a conversation between her teacher and myself. How is Kerry really doing in school, I asked? Fine, the teacher said, but she has a tendency to dream. Wonderful, I told her, would you encourage her to do more of it.

Last night (as I am writing this), I met as a member of the board of directors of a charitable organization (the Ronald McDonald House). We talked finances. We are a favorite local charity, and with good reason. We have done well with finances and we use the money wisely; but, of course, the day may come when another charity takes a more favored status. Our job, one of the directors said, is to take the money we have and invest it safely but with the attempt to get as much money in return as we could. But, is this our real job? Would we want to invest in cigarette companies even if we knew we could maximize profits? in tobacco futures? in South Africa? Or, is our responsibility to support the community that has supported us for so long? Northern Albertans have given so much to the house: should we forego the possibility of gaining 15% on investments for 7 1/2% return invested in local companies? What is the right way?

This morning in the hospital, I talked with one of the nurses. I have spoken with her before about her kids. Her children are not doing as well as she would like them to do in school; she wonders about how she can help. Her son, in grade eight, has difficulty. Efforts to make him "apply himself" don't seem to work, and he resists. She thinks that he is working about as hard as he can, without giving himself to constant study and giving up on the rest of life. Still his grades are not high. He's a good kid and she doesn't want to make him hate her by pushing, but his grades only get to such

a point. What should she do?

What do you want your kid to be, really, when he grows, I ask? What is your hope for him? She wants him to be a good person, to make a contribution to society. She wants him to be a "successful" person. Are we being seduced into believing that academics is more important than it really is, I ask her? He is a good kid, she says. He does work hard, in a balanced sort of way, she says. Is it "evil" that he is not the smartest kid in the class? Would he be better if he were smarter? Maybe the task is to encourage him not to become discouraged, in spite of some of the frustrations he will face, we agree. Maybe Don Quixote is right, I think. The real danger may not be what we perceive it to be.

Zorba the Greek knew how to live. Kazantzakis compares Zorba's life, grasped fully, with the life of the scholar-engineer who is Zorba's boss at the mine. The man of books is compared to the man of passion. Books can be a substitute for action, Zorba the Greek instructs us. Wordy examinations about life may be instructive, but they ain't like living. Not if one is to live with fullness, with fertility, with real love and zest. Tenderness is only tenderness when it sees action. Life is a "divine whirlwind" where Zorba saw "everything every day as if it were for the first time." What is real and what is Memorex, the books asks? And, in reading Zorba, we are admonished to consider the question deeply, "as if for the first time."

## Literature Helps Us Redefine Ideas

I have mentioned spending time in the hospital, and undoubtedly some may wonder why. Simply, and without trying to let my own feelings show, my

daughter has leukemia. This fact is important to me. I have sometimes used this knowledge in talks to make points about the impact of crises or peak experiences on developing a sensitivity to teaching and living, but I want to use this bit of information to make a different point today. Often people talk about the courage of children as they face the physical and mental agony of a life-threatening disease and its almost equally unpleasant treatment. I think we can overstate particular ideas of courage and, in overstatement, miss other ideas of courage.

Courage is less obvious, but often more important, in enduring a diseae than in facing any particular episode of the disease. I think the immediate pain and sickness is often easier to face than the knowledge that the disease will be there tomorrow, and tommorow, and tomorrow. The gripping pain will be over, whether one is courageous or not. How does one endure with dignity the abusive thoughts and actions of others? In my daughter's case, how did she get up the guts to go to junior high school, bald and bloated, day after day? She is a girl at an age when girls really state to care about such things. How does she get up the guts to retain a vision of a future when one seems so bleak? How does she live in dignity as an oddity? How can I help her?

Joseph Conrad's short novel Youth gives us some vision for the courage of endurance. The men of the story, and even the ship if it were alive, discover that bravery means little more than endurance. Impatient youth, anxious to test courage, become battered and beaten into stubborn survival. And it is this stubborn, almost leisurely, surviving which Conrad shows as the real courage of humans. Fateful choices chase humans through life.

Humans, like the symbolic motto of the ship, must "Do or Die."

Last week, I was part of an interview team that hired a new house manager for the Ronald MacDonald house. The executive secretary told the applicants that the job was't extremely difficult, but at the same time it was very difficult. It was a job that "bit at your ankles and wore you down." Courage, Conrad suggests, is to take the ankle biting and keep walking.

Literature Helps Us Consider The Impact of Personal Actions

In Rain, Somerset Maugham shows the hollowness of self-centered rightgousness. Do we act for others, or for ourselves? Do we get caught up in our own cliched righteousness, our own ego-centered passion? Are we blind to our true motives and intents? And, if we are, what are the effects of our actions on others and, almost as important, on ourselves?

Davidson, a missionary, is quarantined on an island with Sadie Thompson, a woman with a "reputation." A police raid has just turfed Sadie out of the red-light district of Hawaii. Sadie parties. She blares her music. Her parties and loud phonograph wear on Davidson. and he sets out to save her. He tries "love." She insults him. In desperation, he threatens to turn her in. She could face deportation and a jail sentence she has evaded in the United States. Finally, the missionary wins. Her music stops. He spends long hours with her, in prayer. But one morning, Davidson is found dead, the victim of his own knife. Sadie cranks up the phonograph again and screams "You men! You filthy, dirty pigs! You're all the same, all of you. Pigs! Pigs!"

Jim and Tammy Baker should have read Rain. Davidson, like many others, is uncompromising. And, he is hypocritical. He easily judges others, and doesn't see his own motives very clearly. The sad story is that he ruins whatever chance there is to change Sadie's life, to make it better from either his or her point of view. He fails because he doesn't want to help her - not really. He wants to help himself. He never considers the impact of his actions on Sadie.

What are the impacts of my own actions on others? When do I, in my teaching and in my life, talk one game and play another? I can recall, right now, many times when I have lost sight of my real purpose, even though I spoke loudly and clearly of what that purpose was. Times when I have considered my own needs more than the needs of my students. Times when I have acted on my own best interests, or have seen other's interests as exactly like my own. Rain, and many other pieces of literature just like it, reminds me to consider the impact of my actions on the lives of other people.

Literature helps us see the terrible results when people live out of control. Davidson, the missionary, is out of control. Taking his own life is his fatal and flawed attempt to regain control. The examples of characters out of control are numerous. Merimee's short novel Colomba is the story of people consumed with revenge and the havoc they wreck on those around them. Colomba's blind hatred forces her brother Orso to murder two brothers, even though Orso himself is unwilling to seek revenge. The murders make her leap with joy. She has no thought for her brother, whom she supposedly loves, even though her actions force him into hiding with bandits. In her thoughtless joy, she finds the pathetic father of the murdered

brothers, who has become mad with grief, and takes great pleasure in delivering one last taunt.

Literature Allows Us to See Through the Eyes of Others

One of my favorite books of all time is Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes, even though it is about a grade three reading level. Maybe I have a special feeling for the book because it is about a young girl with leukemia. The book is written from the diary of a young Japanese girl, immediately after World War II. The part of the book I really like is a section where the young girl is shown hoping against hope that she will get better. She doesn't want to get better because she has any personal fear or selfish thoughts for her own future. No, she sees the pain that her illness is causing her parents and she doesn't want her parents to feel bad.

The irony is that Sadako is Japanese. The story is her actual story, written right after World War II. Her leukemia is the result of Allied nuclear bombs dropped on Japanese cities. She was the enemy, part of the people who "didn't think like we did." Yet, her actions and thoughts are very much like those of the children I have met with leukemia in Canada. The book Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes gives us an insightful look into the actual feelings of the enemy. Suddenly, she doesn't seem much like the enemy. In this sense, literature is peace education. Part of all wars is fought in the language of the people. In order to justify killing others, philosophers tell us, we must steal the person from the targets. They can no longer be people. Instead, they must be gooks, japs, nips, objects, and targets. To know know know is not always to love love love; but, it is

harder to hate people than things.

The German hero of All Quiet on the Western Front is forced to spend a night in the trenches with the French "enemy" he has just knifed. During the night, the German is forced to endure the dying man's groans and the growing realization that he has just killed a person, a father with a family, and the victim of the same numbing craziness that he, himself, faces. He is forced, with his fellow soldiers, to consider harsh questions of war and hopeless questions of peace. He forgets all else but marching, "this soldier with the big boots and the shut heart."

It is strangely disconcerting to think that these targets think like we do. Literature helps me remember this fact. And, while I don't have enemies, I sometimes act like it. I can and do objectify people. Alvin Toffler cites this as a trend of our times. We know the people in our lives as their jobs and not their personalities. The grocery store clerk. The cleaning woman. The teacher. We meet more people and know fewer. This is not for me. I have decided that I would like to know more people.

## Literature Helps Us to See with Our Feelings

The power of literature is that you can put a face on ideas. People are real flesh and blood, living in the guts of life, facing the fundamental issues and decisions of living. Literature is powerful because it helps us see people making decisions, decisions like those of Thoman Mann's character Tonio Kroger as he faces which path in life to take, or in "The Song of Roland" as Roland faces the horenduous consequences of his decision to place his pride in fulfilling the duty from Charlemagne or in calling for help. It

is the same power that the Vietnam War Memorial, in its utter simplicity, addresses the real horror of war. And, it is the same power that makes me hang the prize-winning photo of the young Vietnamese girl running nude, burned, and in desperate fear and pain in my office to remind me what my real job as a teacher is.

Literature has real power because it is art. Art invites you to look at life through your feelings, the feelings that you share with other humans. Literature invites us to share our decisions with the decisions of other people - the characters we see in literature. Maybe the word invitation is too tame. A real story, real literature and real art, grabs you by the throat and almost rudely forces you to inspect life up close and personal, through your emotions as a person. Unlike epistemologies like science or philosophy or ethics, which make people say "I understand" then "I see," art begins with the statement "I see" or "I feel" and then moves to understand.

Often people suggest that literature allows you to see the world through the eyes of another character. But, what literature allows you to do is to see the world through your own eyes as you stand in the place of another character. This distinction may seem subtle, but it is not. You, the reader or the hearer, bring your entire history to the story. You can never not be you. But, you can become you in a new situation. In some ways, you are able to think both like you and like the other person at the same time. You are informed through the troubles and ideas of the other person. You are especially informed as you see their decisions and the consequences of these decisions that they must live out. And, it is you who learn new things through living in the experiences of others.

Literature Helps Us Be an Audience of Life

I have told many stories from literature. I have pointed out how what I have come to know affects how I understand my everyday choices. I want you to listen to a piece of the tape of Whoopi Goldberg's Broadway Show. I think you'll find it interesting how she takes on various personas. This cut is called "The Crippled Lady."

Whoopie Goldberg's crippled lady catches us in our own prejudices. She uses the dark side of humor to make us laugh, then to make us understand how narrow-minded we are. If you listen to the audience, they understand her work in two different stages. At first, they recognize that she is playing the part of the crippled lady. There is a kind of an all laugh together idea. Suddenly, the laughter becomes more hollow. She tells them that they, the "normal" people, look at crippled people like they are freaks. And, because they are freaks they are different than normal people.

Whoopie asks us to make a decision by forcing us to see ourselves in the audience. We become an audience of the audience. We see them come to understand some things powerfully. They must appreciate the fact that they are normal. They must learn, as Whoopie says, that being a freak is in the eye of the beholder. They are the beholders. They decide that a freak is a freak. Inside, the crippled lady is a "lady." She feels like any other lady. Her needs for self-affirmation, which she could never give herself, are as powerful as my own. She wants a strong and powerful relationship with a man, and it is this relationship with another human which finally makes her

free. She may never move her leg, or hip, or lift her head off her shoulder. But, she is a "foxy lady." We also learn how powerful our own actions toward people can be. We learn that our actions liberate others.

None of us, I think, are free from prejudices. I have decided who I like and who I don't. Often, I have made these decisions without consciously thinking about them. As much as I try to live my life sensitively, I often find myself coming up short. Recently, I was in MacDonalds. As I passed a family, I noticed that the mother had a desperately mis-formed face. How terrible, I thought. It must have been an awful accident. How sad that she has had to endure this malformation. But then, as I passed on the other side of the family, I noticed that each of the children had the same deformed facial features. My first thought was why a mother who had a hereditary deformation would chance having children. What right-minded parent would subject their children to such a curse. OK, maybe one. But, not the second child. Then, I realized how presumptuous I was being. Like the audience listening to Whoopi Goldberg, I was measuring the quality of a person's life with their outside appearance. I was saying that these people lived horrible lives, just because I was equating appearance with value.

In one of the books we [David Dillon (editor of Language Arts) and I] used for our curriculum unit on culture that we wrote for Scholastic Books, we attempted to explore the culture of "freaks." We used a wonderful book called The Alfred Summer. The book is narrated by Lester Klopper, a 14 year old boy with cerebral palsy. He can't control the movements of his body or his speech. His body is "spastic" but his mind is keen. Unfortunately, everyone sees him from the outside. Even his parents, especially his mother,

treat him like a freak. In one memorable scene from the book, Lester is taken for a walk by his mother. Although she is well-intentioned, she treats him like he is on a leash. The metaphor is that he is an animal, less than human. He knows it, but is powerless to do anything. The whole walk, done to placate the "animal's" need for exercise is a humiliating experience for Lester. Every step he haltingly takes kills him a little more inside. He is a victim of his mother's patronizing attempts to be a parent to a young man who has, for her, become a burden rather than a son. She, too, sees Lester from the outside.

Conclusion

How shall we see literature? How shall we teach it? From the inside, or from the outside? Another decision must be made. It is one thing to study comprehension and story structure. It is one thing to know the genre' of a particular piece of literature. It is one thing to know the author's background, and the poetic structure of the author's work, and whether an author is neo-classisist. It is one thing to make a list of vocabulary words and activities that go along with a story. It is one thing to ask questions at the end of each chapter to see if students are keeping up. But, it is another thing to know a book from the inside, to partake with the character's life, to watch the implications of the character's actions, and to finally understand our own lives through the lives of others.

This is the great inside story of literature. This is the wonderful opportunity of seeing the created words that authors offer us. This is my chance to have my decisions instructed by the actions of others. Hopefully I

am becoming a more educated person. If I'm not, it is not the fault of the literature that I read.

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